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## NextGen Librarians: Interviews with RUSA Interns

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# NextGen Librarians

## *Interviews with RUSA Interns*

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president of the Reference and User Services Association, is Science and Technology Librarian, Bibliographer for the College of Human Sciences, and Coordinator of Staff Training for Reference and Collections at Iowa State University; e-mail: shonrock@iastate.edu.

**B**ecause I knew the goals of my Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) presidency would cluster around encouraging membership by new librarians, I took the opportunity as vice president of RUSA to appoint interns to all the RUSA-level committees and to nominate some for American Library Association-level (ALA) committees. My second column takes a peek at the people who filled these positions. I will outline the interns' opinions relating to Millennial and NextGen librarians and their characteristics and discuss their views about librarianship, both as it exists today and its prospects for the future. In addition to being termed NextGen or Millennial Generation, this demographic cohort is sometimes referred to as NetGen or Gen Y.<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the new RUSA committee interns for their time in responding to my questionnaire, and I would also like to thank Megan Perez, who is the RUSA Spectrum Scholar this year, for his comments relating to their responses. (The list of questions is included in the appendix.) Some of the interns' thoughts and ideas, along with Megan's, are included throughout this piece.

In the July/August 2005 issue of *Public Libraries*, Features Editor Renee Vaillancourt McGrath wrote about Tecker Consultants' analysis of Millennials (which Tecker Consultants defines as the generation born between 1983 and 1993) as "the digital generation."<sup>2</sup> She notes that Tecker Consultants reports that younger generations:

- want to be part of a highly motivated team of committed people;
- thrive where they can be who they are and express themselves;
- want to work closely with and learn from colleagues they respect;
- want to socialize and form friendships; and
- set goals big enough to engage their imagination.<sup>3</sup>

Many of these characteristics make the Millennial Generation good organizational members. McGrath then argues,

younger generations will join associations not because they have to, but because they *really want* to. They seek life challenges that match their skills and interests. They are also looking to contribute to something greater than what individuals can accomplish alone, as well as human connections that make work fun.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly some of what McGrath and others like Rachel Singer Gordon, who writes and edits the NextGen column

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for *Library Journal*, say is true. I admit that for the most part these new librarians are technologically savvy, but how different are they from the Baby Boomer librarians, like myself, who they will be replacing? For the purposes of this column, I thought it would be interesting to examine several characteristics of NextGen librarians. In the process, I would like to consider several aspects and characteristics of being a new librarian—according to both what the literature is saying about them and what they are saying about themselves. My discussion will focus on the following aspects of NextGen librarians: their library school experience, their motivation for joining ALA and RUSA, and their attitudes about the future, including the changes the profession will undergo, and their feelings about what will remain the same.

### LIBRARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Of the fourteen responses I received from the new RUSA committee interns, all were demographically NextGen or Millennial in age, and all but one have been practicing professional librarians for between one and three years (although a couple of them are second-career new librarians). Their current positions are all in academic libraries of varying sizes and locations; several have past experience in public libraries either as students, paraprofessionals, or professional librarians. The library schools they attended were located across the country from east to west and north to south, and all but one did some type of internship or practicum. In addition, two had been paraprofessionals before going to library school to earn an MLS. For most, the experience they received from their practicum, paraprofessional days, or assistantship was listed as the single most important part of their library education learning experience. The areas where they worked during these experiences included reference (in three cases, in a public library), instruction, creation of online guides, teaching, and even (in three cases) cataloging and digitizing of materials. What most felt they had missed out on was information about budgeting and collection development. A couple of interns mentioned they did not expect needing to know “how to be a liaison to an academic department” in their new jobs.

Some of the interns’ responses are perhaps best explained by the work of Stephen Bell and John Shank, who suggest that the modern day librarian is a “blended librarian” (<http://blendedlibrarian.org>).<sup>5</sup> The term “blended librarian” reflects the need for librarians to juggle multiple tasks in their positions; now, more than ever before, new librarians are being asked to be multifaceted librarians, responsible for reference, instruction, collection development, and information technology all at once. Several of the interns’ comments centered on the importance of the internship or assistantship in demonstrating this aspect of librarianship. One intern noted that, “The program seemed far too general; none of the classes went in-depth enough to prepare me for the workplace. It did, however, acquaint me with the principles of librarianship.” Another said, “It was hard to decide whether to concentrate in one area or spread yourself thin in a lot of different areas. I

chose the latter and was disappointed.” Still another (perhaps not to be unexpected) said, “Despite my work at the library, I started my first position still not fully understanding what exactly I would do all day as a librarian. I was not at all prepared for my work as a liaison to an academic department.” Megan, too, noted that work experience while a student was critical both in its own right and in combination with coursework. One person who had been part of a new online program said, “[I] felt it failed to provide the distance students with an environment of community.” Megan, who is currently a student, noted that the responses to this question probably depended a lot on the library school and the individual, that the respondents somehow saw *theory* as negative if there was no *practical* to complement it. He felt that the important comment here was that “despite preparing students well, online programs did not provide students with a sense of community.”

### MOTIVATION FOR JOINING ALA AND RUSA

Another telling piece of information revealed by the interns’ responses was that only four of the respondents had had any orientation to professional organizations during their library school experiences, and for most that was optional. RUSA is hopeful that its new RUSA Ambassador Program, which is taking RUSA members into library schools to discuss professional organizations, will serve to increase this participation in RUSA. A couple of the respondents indicated that instructors and mentors (and in one case, someone they met during a practicum) encouraged them to get involved in ALA. Interestingly enough, more than half of these interns were initially nominated for their intern positions either by former library school instructors or experienced librarians where they are now employed, who saw my call for nominations and volunteers on a discussion list.

So what do new librarians expect from their organizational memberships? Tecker Consultants, during a workshop I attended, suggests that members expect their organizations to use technology for the following purposes:

- to identify and anticipate their needs;
- to give them instant, easy access to useful knowledge;
- to enable them to actively participate in the work and decision-making of the association; and
- to create a sense of community that fosters attachment and connection.<sup>6</sup>

Of the RUSA interns, three respondents mentioned being student members of ALA. The interns’ motivations for joining ALA and RUSA after graduation varied and included such reasons as:

- staying engaged in the profession;
- meeting tenure requirements;
- participating in discussions with colleagues;
- being part of the future of the profession;
- avoiding getting left behind professionally;

- adding to a “weak” resume; and
- sampling library organizations.

Perhaps some of their comments are simply reflective of their status as NextGen librarians. One person said, “I felt I wasn’t a complete librarian without an involvement in my professional organization. RUSA’s related to my job and I thought this was also [a] way of connecting and sharing ideas with other professionals doing the same thing as I do.” McGrath cites research by Tecker Consultants that indicates that it is difficult for organizations to attract younger members because:

- programs are not relevant enough for younger members;
- programs are not interactive or hands-on;
- it takes too long to get involved;
- leadership opportunities are not accessible;
- associations are not open to new ideas; and
- associations are not welcoming to new members.<sup>7</sup>

To some extent, what Tecker Consultants says about the difficulty of attracting and keeping younger members is born out by some things the interns said. One remarked, “At the moment I’m sampling library organizations. Based on my experience, what I’d tell new library students is that there’s a wide range of organizations out there—if something doesn’t fit, keep looking and something out there will.” Megan felt these responses were “quite honest.” He noted that most responses were fairly typical and expected: to network, to keep up with the latest trends, to stay engaged, to connect with and learn from the more experienced members of the profession, and so on. However, responses indicating a need to serve the profession as part of a tenure-track requirement or to have something to add to a weak resume surprised him, as did the one respondent who admitted to “sampling” library organizations.

Although the rationale may have seemed surprising to other NextGen members, it is what such writers as McGrath and Richard T. Sweeney have expected. According to Mark Levin,

Whatever the underlying reason, baby boomers carried their need to network into the mainstream of membership organizations in every industry, profession, and community. As Generation Next questions the value of participation in association leadership, the generation that gets credit for the whole concept of challenging values is now having its own values challenged. Virtually every trade association, professional society, social-service organization, and community group is seeing a (sometimes dramatic) reduction in the involvement of young people.<sup>8</sup>

While the first step may be to get the NextGen librarians to join an organization, the important next step will be keeping them involved and letting the strings of leadership fall

into their care. Now that these new librarians are involved in RUSA, we must make it relevant for them to be involved—that is, more than something to be merely “sampled” and discarded. This very topic was the subject of a brainstorming session at the 2006 ALA Midwinter Meeting in San Antonio that resulted in suggestions for ways to engage and keep these NextGen librarians involved in our organization. The high-priority items identified during this session included:

- targeting communications for new librarians,
- publicizing new opportunities
- emphasizing benefits of face-to-face communication,
- promoting participation in the RUSA Ambassador Program to reach library school students, and
- incorporating more of the new technology, for example, blogs, wikis, and online communities.<sup>9</sup>

Some of these ideas will come to fruition during the coming year.

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## ATTITUDES ABOUT THE FUTURE

### What Will Change

Perhaps the most interesting and thought-provoking responses to the questions I asked related to what the interns saw in their crystal balls regarding future changes in reference and user services—what would change and what would not. Some of the changes they envision are truly signs of their generation:

- print reference sources will vanish;
- the reference role will become identified with instruction;
- online sources will proliferate;
- more reference will be conducted remotely;
- ready reference will continue to decline;
- more personal involvement with students in their arenas;
- reference budgets will lean more heavily toward electronic resources; and
- instruction commons areas will become more commonplace.

As several of the writers note, this is the first generation that was “born digital.” They have never known the time when TV did not exist, and they expect things to happen immediately. On this note, Megan pointed out that, “Many of the responses here involved the increased use of technology, remote services, online resources, and the like.” However, he said he was glad that one respondent noted that there is a need to “develop quantitative research-assessment tools beyond simple question statistics to measure our performance.” Another intern noted that personal involvement with students on their own “turf” will become more necessary, as will the use of wikis, blogs, and the implementation of simple chat software. Several preferred examples of commercial technology were mentioned in the interns’ responses, including InstantService, a chat service used by such companies

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as Godiva Chocolatier.<sup>10</sup> Other examples of where these interns are looking for information can be found at the blogs they mentioned, such as the Shifted Librarian (which is also mentioned by McGrath). Jenny Levine, who moderates this blog, bills herself as the “Information Maven.”<sup>11</sup> She says, “I took the name [Shifted Librarian] from a presentation that I do called “Information Shifting,” about how the change from pursuing information to receiving information is and will be affecting libraries.”<sup>12</sup> As of August 2006, Jenny is employed at ALA as the internet development specialist and strategy guide. Another software program mentioned is Flickr, which is billed on its Web site as, “The best way to store, search, sort, and share your photos.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, ALA has hired Rob Carlson as the new manager of ALA’s blogs and wikis.

Other interns wrote that in the technology realm, information commons areas will become the norm, and there will be more collaboration between reference and other departments—resulting in a blurring of department lines. Megan responded by saying he thought that:

A glaring omission in these responses is a defense of the printed book. Yes, online resources are becoming more numerous and being used more heavily, but, particularly for in-depth research questions, printed monographic reference titles are unique, readily available sources of valuable, scholarly work. The context here is really important and it seems to be that lest we forget, many of our current electronic tools rely heavily on their print part for completeness.

One final comment made by a couple of interns speaks for itself; they suggested that a change of image is in order for librarians.

In his article “Reinventing Library Buildings and Services for the Millennial Generation,” Sweeney suggest some of the steps needed to reinvent libraries for Millennials. Some of these are steps that our libraries are beginning to take, but they bear repeating. Among other things, Sweeney writes that libraries must do the following:

- play important roles in helping and stimulating people to find and learn authentic new knowledge
- make local and published information searchable through Google and other Millennial tools and information sources
- present Millennials with a compelling vision to maintain their loyalty
- provide many different types of library spaces carefully studied and marketed to Millennials
- use information and communication to market library services.<sup>14</sup>

### What Won’t Change

What won’t change? Some of the interns’ responses here are more an indication of the kind of profession librarianship is than a reflection of their generation.

- customer service;

- librarian expertise: librarians will continue to be the best resource;
- people are always going to need guidance;
- reference will continue to exist because resources are not always intuitive; and
- human touch is enduring.

Megan says he felt that,

The respondents’ comments all shared one idea: reference will still have a human face. This has been expressed in different ways—“The human touch will endure”; “The need for excellent customer service will endure”; “People will continue to need guidance in their information gathering”; “We will still have to assist those who have difficulty with computers in general”—but the sentiment is the same.

After reading all these comments, there is one particular passage that stood out in my mind above all the others and I thought I should share it in its entirety. “Perhaps it is because I am a NextGen librarian, but I am eager to explore the opportunities for even greater service to patrons that is enabled by technologies such as blogs, RSS, podcasting, wikis, and other social networking tools. I think that if libraries can get over the trepidation that comes with emergent technologies and establish a strong presence in the Web 2.0 world, we have the potential to reach many users who do not currently view the library as an important resource in their lives.” I’m not sure why this comment sticks out so much for me. Maybe it’s because I share the same eagerness.

So what’s next? This all speaks volumes about the expectations of the NextGen librarians and the types of programs that will get them involved in ALA and RUSA. The newly minted Emerging Leaders program initiated by ALA President Leslie Burger (with the support of the ALA divisions and round tables) seeks to give one hundred new librarians a chance at getting involved in the leadership side of ALA. Hopefully, RUSA will gain much from continuing to appoint interns to its committees and making sure they are initiated in the leadership of the organization. Continuing to get new librarians involved as interns and making sure they are encouraged and welcomed will go a long way in this endeavor. I am also hopeful that the RUSA Ambassador Program will grow in strength as it attempts to reach library school students before their careers are completely formed. We must not wring our hands about the graying of the profession in librarianship, but rather make sure we are welcoming new librarians and encouraging them to get involved. In addition, to proverbially “throw out the baby boomer with the bath water” is not a good idea, either, because much remains to be learned from the current generation of librarians.

These are my observations and opinions. Because I am never beyond being a rabble-rouser or baiting the hook, I’d like nothing better than to hear from you regarding this



column. Responses can be sent to me directly at my e-mail address or you can register and join the new RUSA Blog (connect from the RUSA Web site at [www.ala.org/rusa](http://www.ala.org/rusa)) and give it a try. Watch for a discussion of RUSA's role in the training and certification of paraprofessionals and the "never say no" attitude of public services librarians in my future columns.

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## APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your library-school background?
2. How long have you been a working librarian?
3. What library school did you attend?
4. What reference and user services/readers' advisory courses did you take? Please think broadly.
5. Did you do an internship or practicum? Please describe.
6. How well do you think your library school experience prepared you for your first position? What didn't it do adequately?
7. Did you have any orientation to ALA or other professional organizations? What motivated your involvement in ALA and RUSA? What would you tell other new librarians about your experience?
8. What does your crystal ball see for changes in the ways reference will change in the near future?
9. In what ways won't it change?
10. What would you like to add?

## ADVICE FOR PROSPECTIVE AUTHORS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

manuscript is accepted for publication, this decision letter will include a projected publication date. If you have been encouraged to resubmit your manuscript after major revisions, the decision letter will offer specific suggestions for improvement. If your manuscript is not acceptable for *RUSQ*, the *RUSQ* editor may suggest other publication venues. Most journal editors will go out of their way to be helpful by offering suggestions on how you can improve your scholarship to increase your chances of getting your manuscript accepted for publication. Now that you know how to avoid some common pitfalls, I hope you will be encouraged to submit your manuscript to *RUSQ* for review.

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